

Duncan's Next Role An Open Question

*Insiders Speculate
On Range of Options*

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In the hour before he went public with word that he was pulling out of the Maryland governor's race, Douglas M. Duncan strode into an intimate gathering of senior aides on the second floor of the county Executive Office Building.

It was a homecoming for Duncan, who has spent much of the past year miles away from his Rockville office, crisscrossing the state in search of votes. Greeted by enthusiastic applause, Duncan smiled easily and, to many of his colleagues, appeared relieved about the decision to ditch the campaign trail and seek treatment for what had been diagnosed only days before as depression.

When Duncan next returns to the second floor, after an unspecified period of weeks, he will have less than five months to close out his 12-year tenure as Montgomery County's most influential elected official. Liberated from a Democratic primary campaign that was struggling to gain traction, Duncan will have the opportunity to turn his full attention to county business — and, if he chooses, have a hand in shap-

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Insiders Speculate on Duncan's Future Roles

ing the dynamics of other races.

"Doug, in his career, has gone from triumph to triumph to triumph," said the lone Republican on the County Council, Howard A. Denis (Potomac-Bethesda). "I know he wants to end on a high note, and I'm confident that he will close strongly."

In his brief public remarks Thursday, Duncan said he would "do what I can" to help elect Democrats at every level of government. Duncan could choose to sit on his campaign bank account or dole out chunks of what one aide estimated at well more than \$700,000 to candidates in contests across the state.

Maryland Democratic Party Chairman Terry Lierman said Duncan could use his considerable statewide operation to help his former primary rival, Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, rally voters on the Eastern Shore and in neighboring Prince George's County and ensure a sizable turnout in Montgomery in the general election matchup with Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R).

School board member and County Council candidate Valerie Ervin (D) said she expected Duncan to stay neutral in the Democratic primary contest for county executive between council member Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large) and former council member Isaiah Leggett.

"He's an icon," she said of Duncan. "If he were to make a decision to support one candidate or the other, it could turn the race."

Even before his stunning announce-

ment, Duncan was a lame duck. Pivotal decisions, such as how to divvy up the county's \$4 billion budget, were locked up last month. Others, including contract negotiations with police officers and county employees, will be left to his successor, who takes over in December.

The hum of the state's largest county government ratchets down in the summer, especially during an election year when the executive's job is up for grabs and all nine council members are running for reelection or seeking higher office. The council will take a hiatus from Aug. 1 through the September primary.

But when Duncan reemerges, he will be back in the take-charge position of administering that he relishes. There is the expansion and makeover of Montrose Parkway and contracts to award for the long-debated intercounty connector that he has championed.

A new Rockville library is nearly complete and there are enhancements, such as a new fire station for Clarksburg, where lax oversight of development was revealed last year. Duncan could designate more county-owned land for affordable housing projects, as he's done in Bethesda.

"He'll get to focus on something he does extremely well, without the added burdens of having to worry about what someone in Western Maryland will say," said council member Nancy Floreen (D-At Large). "Doing one job is a lot easier than doing two."

Although Duncan has the power to veto County Council nominations, he is not expected to interfere with the high-profile appointment of a new Planning

Board chairman July 25.

Duncan's closest advisers, who were still reeling from Thursday's announcement, said it is too early to say whether their boss might try to put his stamp on one last major initiative.

"He's definitely never been one to coast," said communications director David Weaver. "He's going to govern Montgomery County the same way he has for 12 years — aggressively, in a very public way and no doubt stepping on a few toes in the process."

One of Duncan's strengths, according to observers, has been his appointment of strong managers in pivotal positions and his preference for delegating, not micromanaging. Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) said he has no qualms about Duncan's decision to serve out the rest of his term because of the people he has put in place.

Had Duncan decided to resign, the council would have appointed a successor, which Leventhal said would have been "more disruptive."

"He knows the job, and he'll have a strong support network," he said. "I know he's weighed the question of whether to keep the job he has, and I have confidence he can do that."

Throughout his tenure, Duncan has used the stature of his office to create a sense of inevitability for potentially perilous undertakings, such as the rehabilitation of downtown Silver Spring.

Uncertain is what, if any, role Duncan might choose to play in using that bully pulpit to encourage others to seek treatment for depression. His campaign blog was flooded with messages from sup-

porters, some battling depression, who commended him for talking publicly about his illness.

Even though the formal budget process has ended, Silverman said that Duncan could tap millions of dollars in reserves with the council's cooperation if he wanted to jump-start a mental health initiative.

"It's wide open if opportunities present themselves," Silverman said.

If Duncan is indeed in a position to dole out campaign funds, it would serve to quell speculation that his decision to drop out of the governor's race was motivated in part by political factors. He trailed O'Malley in fundraising and was consistently behind in the polls.

"Having campaigned opposite Doug in 1994 and having seen him govern since 1994, there is no doubt in my mind that Doug is no quitter," said Gus Bauman, a former Planning Board chairman. "He was gaining ground on Mayor O'Malley; there was no reason to quit unless it was a personal decision, such as the one announced."

Campaign manager Scott Arceneaux said Duncan's treatment and recovery would determine the timing and depth of his involvement in the upcoming elections.

"Whether that happens in time to get out to campaign, I don't know," Arceneaux said. "It's not a matter of wanting to or not; it's matter of priorities and getting his health in order and being with his family."

Staff writer Cameron W. Barr contributed to this report.